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Environmental watchdogs demand action on waste pits

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Damage to waste pits berm

The San Jacinto River Waste Pits Superfund site was completely covered with floodwaters last week (note the damaged cap at berm). The flow from the raging river washing over the toxic site was so intense it damaged an adjacent section of the Interstate 10 bridge.

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But Jacquelyn Young with Texas Health and Environmental Alliance isn't buying it.

"We are calling for the EPA to base their statements off of facts," Young said. "We are hearing that statements have been made by parties involved with the San Jacinto River Waste Pits that there has not been a release from the site. Now our residents fear returning to their homes that have been inundated, some to their roofs, with flood waters. This area received an enormous amount of rain. What's different is that we didn't have a storm surge here but we had an immense rainfall event with Harvey and our residents fear that what is in their homes may be contaminated."

The San Jacinto River Waste Pits Superfund site was completely covered with floodwaters last week. The flow from the raging river washing over the toxic site was so intense it damaged an adjacent section of the Interstate 10 bridge. According to an EPA survey from last year, soil from the former waste pits contains dioxins and other long-lasting toxins linked to birth defects and cancer.

Young and Scott Jones with the Galveston Bay Foundation are now asking for a full and thorough inspection of the site as soon as possible.

Posted: Wednesday, September 6, 2017 12:00 am | Updated: 5:52 am, Wed Sep 6, 2017.

By Christopher James

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Near the toxic San Jacinto Waste Pits site, environmental activists called for the U.S. EPA to remove contaminants in the wake of a 500-year flood event.

While only a third of the Superfund site can be seen above water a week after Harvey hit, the EPA and the responsible parties (International Paper and McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corporation) say there is no indication any toxins or pollutants leaked from the site.

The responsible parties say the armored cap is intact and that a limited amount of stone material associated with berms surrounding the cap has moved. However, the berms — which ring the perimeter of the cap — do not have any waste material within or beneath them. This means that maintenance, which is already underway according to the responsible parties, will include placing new geotextile and stone reinforcement on the berms.

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"We're calling on the EPA to do an immediate and complete thorough inspection of the San Jacinto River Waste Pits Superfund site," said Jones. "Most of it is still in the San Jacinto River and the reason we're calling for that is we have a temporary cap comprised of some geotextile liner and some geo membrane in some areas and then it's overlaid with rocks of different size. This is envisioned to be a temporary cap and we know we've had issues with the cap in the past with the rock being moved."

Both Jones and Young are concerned with what the condition of the cap is after 40 to 50 inches of rain inundated the area, damaging roads, homes and massive barge bumpers in the San Jacinto River.

Both Jones and Young are also calling for the EPA to make its final decision and go forward with their proposed plan to completely remove the waste.

"We keep seeing flood events like this and we're worried that if we keep being reactive and not proactive to remove the waste that we could really endanger the community, and we can have more seafood advisories in parts of Galveston Bay," said Jones.

Late last year, the EPA proposed removing a majority of the existing cap along with 152,000 cubic yards of contaminated materials at the northern site, which is the site of concern since it is partially submerged in the San Jacinto River. This would cost \$87 million and construction is estimated to take 19 months and about 13,300 truckloads to transport waste material to an off-site facility.

As for the southern site, which is landlocked, the EPA proposed removing 50,000 cubic yards of contaminated materials for disposal at a cost of \$9.9 million. This could take about seven months for construction.

Both sites were used by Champion Paper to dispose of paper mill sludge in the mid-1960s, and they contain mercury, PCBs, furans and cancer-causing dioxins.

"We need the EPA to quickly move forward with signing the Record of Decision as they have proposed for full removal of the waste pits," said Young. "The waste pits are currently in poor condition. You can see that with the third of the site that you can see above the water right now — the tarp is displaced, rock that was once holding down that piece of textile have been displaced."

"We fear what is under the river's waters right now that we can't see," she added. "We need the EPA to stop allowing the potentially responsible parties to add more rock to this cap. Almost every year since this cap was constructed it has undergone repairs."

Since July 2011, the armored cap has required many repairs and extensive maintenance nearly every year. From about 200 square feet of stone eroding in 2012, to five areas missing part, or all, armor stone with exposed geotextile in 2013, to 500 feet of cap missing or deficient in 2015, the cap has been vulnerable without a 500-year flood event occurring.

"Now the potentially responsible parties are saying that the repairs that need to be done right now from their visual inspection of one-third of the site as 'routine maintenance,'" Young said. "Harvey was not a routine event, this is not routine maintenance. Lets stop kicking the can to future generations and lets clean up the waste pits once and for all."

"If you look at how the EPA has handled similar Superfund sites, they have required full removal at almost all similar Superfund sites across the nation," she added. "Our current residents and our future generations should be treated no differently."

For more information about the site, visit www.epa.gov/tx/sjrwsp.



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